

From the Museum Experience to the Museum as an Experience

FROM OBJECTS TO VISITORS: THE VIRTUALISATION OF THE MUSEUM

The last two centuries have seen museums gradually opening to a wider audience. Since the 1960s, the social role of museums has been increasingly questioned – criticising in particular museum elitism and conservatism – while the public has acquired an unprecedented centrality in the institution’s activities.¹ Many researches in museum studies maintain that today visitors can no longer be considered as passive recipients; they are, instead subjects capable of actively engaging with the exhibits and with the information provided by the institution, and of discussing and negotiating values and meanings.² Thus, the emergence of a new paradigm, alternative to the Modernist one, is now widely acknowledged.³ Among the scholars who noted this radical transformation of museum institutions, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill uses the term ‘post-museum’ to describe an emerging museum model, which in her view has many positive features, and that she describes as a process or an experience. The post-museum concentrates on the use of objects, rather than on their accumulation, and the exhibition ceases to be the core of museum activities, becoming one among other forms of communication, such as events, discussions, workshops, and performances. The new museum described by Hooper-Greenhill is a venue of exchange where objects are invested with multiple meanings, introducing the possibility of various interpretations and viewpoints, including those of the visitors.⁴ As noted by Hooper-Greenhill, such a perspective implies shifting the focus from objects to visitors and their viewing experience: ‘it is generally expected that audiences wish to be much more active and physically involved in museums today. The age of the passive visitor has passed, to be superseded by the age of the active and discriminating “consumer” or “client”’.⁵

History museums fully incarnate this increased attention for the visitor, and offer a privileged point of view to investigate the processes that affect contemporary museology and curatorial practice, as well as the role of moving images in exhibition design. Indeed, the transformations they went through changed dramatically not only the role of the artefacts, but also the

display format and the strategies of attribution of meaning. The last decades have seen a marked increase in history museums and memorials devoted to particularly traumatic events of the (even recent) past, and a corresponding influx of visitors. History museums traditionally selected objects less for their aesthetic or material value than for their capacity to convey the material traces of the past, and since the 1970s they have considerably diversified their exhibits to include items used in everyday life and by traditionally marginalised groups. The so-called 'New Social History' gave a significant impulse in that direction, by focusing on the experience of hitherto neglected figures, such as women, immigrants, and ethnic minorities.⁶

Along with these changes, we can observe a tendency to set the spotlight on the stories and memories of individuals, and a massive inclusion of personal accounts – often recorded in audio-visual form – in museum collections and exhibitions.⁷ Oral sources acquired a growing importance for museums. 'Oral history' has been institutionally recognised as a discipline since the 1940s, thanks to the collections of witness accounts from the Second World War carried out by Allan Newins at the Columbia Oral History Research Office, and gained in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ Alongside oral accounts, audio-visual ones started being regularly collected from the end of the 1970s, in the wake of a renewed interest in the stories of Holocaust survivors, later extended to those involved in other recent traumatic events. This trend causes society to become saturated with thousands of individual accounts that are necessarily partial and inaccurate, due to their reliance on memory and their tendency to replace objectivity with experiential authenticity.

Museums thus gradually opened to the notion of intangible heritage, which UNESCO defines as the group of representations, practices, and expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups, or individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.⁹ The intangible heritage has been included in ICOM's official definition of the museum:

[A] museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.¹⁰

As video testimonies and audio-visual reconstructions become complementary or even alternative to objects and material evidences, contemporary museums exhibitions are subject to a process of 'virtualisation': the displays become immersive and environmental, privilege experience, and tend to recreate a 'virtual world' that the viewer is invited to enter and explore.¹¹ Such exhibition formats became widespread in contemporary memorial museums,

as Paul Williams argues: ‘precisely because the high stakes associated with the content of memorial museums can produce drama more easily than other types of museums, they are now at the forefront of the “performing museum” paradigm’.¹² Theatrical tropes in museums include stage-set-like reconstructions of historical scenes, as well as the dramatisation of the act of testimony: in live performances or video recordings, real or fictional people that were directly involved in significant events of the past tell their personal stories, accompanying and guiding visitors through the exhibition. Staged historical events, audio-visuals, multi-media technologies, and the planning of immersive and interactive environments turn the museum into a theatrical space, inviting the visitor to take part in a performance. He or she is fully immersed in a context that solicits emotional participation, appealing to senses and bodily experience.

The main aim of many contemporary history museum is, rather than to inform about past events, to actively involve visitors and to solicit their feelings, creating for them a memorable ‘experience’.

MUSEUMS AND THE ‘EXPERIENCE ECONOMY’

The reference to the theatre underpins Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore’s well-known book *The Experience Economy*, published in 1999. According to the model proposed by the authors, rather than simply selling a product, companies stage a series of events and activities for the consumers, who pay in exchange for being involved emotionally, physically, intellectually, and/or spiritually. Customer attraction does not rely so much on the intrinsic value of the product as on the intensity of the consumer experience. Such an experience is strictly personal, insofar as it stems from the tastes and inclinations of each individual, and is designed to be memorable. In other words, companies sell memories rather than material products. With explicit reference to Pine and Gilmore’s proposal, marketing experts Neil and Philip Kotler divide museum experiences into four categories, arranged along a continuum, spanning intellectual, emotional, and visceral characteristics: learning, contemplation, amusement, and excitement.¹³ The last element, which corresponds to the extreme ‘visceral’ plan, is associated with ‘Thrill, Adventure, Fantasy, Immersive experience’.¹⁴

Such interpretations assume that museums are in competition with other actors of the leisure and entertainment industry, also through a variety of activities (conferences, commercial and catering premises, pedagogical activities, and libraries), which complement and accompany the exhibitions as such.¹⁵ According to Andreas Huyssen, the museum has become ‘a site of spectacular *mise en scène* and operatic exuberance’,¹⁶ marked by consumerist tendencies that debase or cancel the experience of alterity. The total

immersion experience proposed by museums is increasingly similar to that of other entertainment venues such as theme parks, as well as media such as video games.

In this scenario, the convergence between museums and other sites of cultural consumerism affects the very definition of their own identity, to the point that a museum exhibition and the experiential dimension that is typical of a theme park are now rarely considered as mutually exclusive, either by the public or by some museum professionals.

Quite to the contrary, the borders between the two are rather permeable. A case in point is the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, opened in 2005 in Springfield, IL. The museum retraces the history of the sixteenth president of the United States through the most salient episodes of his education, civic struggles, and government activities. The display makes ample use of mannequins placed in spectacularly illuminated historical dioramas and is accompanied by a soundtrack of environmental sounds, music, and voices. Even though the distinction between original artefacts and replicas is not always explicit,¹⁷ the reconstruction of the environments is so detailed that it verges on hyperrealism, and the dramatic poses seem to suggest that characters were caught in the very instant they performed those actions. This kind of installation revitalises a number of popular display strategies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the wax cabinet, but also uses multi-media and interactive devices, drawing on a twenty-first century imagery. A convergence strikingly illustrated by the exhibit 'The Civil War in Four Minutes', where various TV monitors show the presidential campaign of 1860 using the textual structure of news bulletins and TV ads.¹⁸ Moreover, many of the devices used in museums are reminiscent of theme parks,¹⁹ like the Whispering Gallery, a winding hall with the walls covered with offensive political cartoons and quotes from newspapers of the period, illustrating the great deal of criticism raised against Lincoln and his wife. The asymmetrical picture frames create an unsettling environment, and, when visitors walk through the hall, they hear whispering voices murmuring the cruel things that were said about the president. This produces a disturbing effect, which led visitors to empathise with the discomfort felt by Lincoln.

Daniel Spock notes that even the public circulation plan of the museum, with all the rooms converging around a central courtyard, is quite similar to that of Disneyland.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum was designed by BRC Imagination Arts, the same company that is also responsible for the Disney MGM Studios Theme Park and the Universal Studios Japan.²¹

BRC describes the museum as 'the first truly experiential museum in the world'.²² A claim driven by promotional rhetoric, which, however, touches

a crucial point: the centrality of the notion of 'experience' in contemporary museology. It is very difficult to identify in curatorial discourses a univocal definition of the concept, or of what an 'experiential museum' should be. For sure, 'experience' is not intended in the general meaning of 'museum visit', but entails an intense, multi-sensory, affective, and often interactive involvement. As Patrizia Violi states, the '*experientialist visitor*' is 'a visitor that will, first and foremost, "have an experience" during his [*sic*] visit, rather than being informed, by acquiring more knowledge of past events, which was the principal underlying idea behind traditional museums'.²³

A number of recurring discursive claims and display practices help to outline the main attributes of contemporary 'experiential museums': the privileging of multi-sensory and emotional engagement over cognitive involvement; the design of immersive and spectacular environments; the emphasis on interactivity and visitors' participation; the central role of storytelling and personal stories; and the extensive use of multi-media technologies.

Many contemporary museums aim to offer to their public a total sensory experience, which gives them the impression of emotionally re-experiencing past events. I agree with Violi when she argues that we should not underestimate the influence of the broader 'spectatorship culture' in which museums are immersed, which renders them 'spectacular media showplaces'.²⁴ For this reason, 'the main emotion they aim to provoke . . . is often one of *wonder*: visitors are to be surprised and captured by spectacular innovations and new presentation forms'.²⁵

Museum scholars propose contrasting readings of the notion of 'experience', oscillating between enthusiasm for the new possibilities of audience involvement, and concerns about the anesthetisation of critical reasoning. One tendency in museological discourse is to consider emotional involvement as an opportunity for visitors to become directly and critically involved. The emphasis is on the role of the public, who is called to actively participate in order to achieve a deeper understanding of a given issue. Museum scholars such as Sheila Watson,²⁶ Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb,²⁷ focusing on historical museums and heritage sites, have highlighted the potential of emotional rather than strictly cognitive aspects in creating a more powerful and meaningful visitor experience. In a similar vein, Alison Landsberg argues for an 'experiential' relationship with mass media products, including museums, and for an acquisition of knowledge based on sensitivity and empathy rather than rational cognition.²⁸ According to Landsberg, developing such a relationship with past narratives enables the acquisition of a 'prosthetic memory'. The term designates memories with no direct connection with the first-hand experience of an individual, but that are nonetheless essential for the development of his or her subjectivity. 'Prosthetic memory', whose

emergence is driven by the forces of capitalism and mass culture, can be transposed to a variety of social and cultural contexts. In Landsberg's view, despite involving some risks, the same process also brings a positive impulse to the construction of individuals and society.

A different interpretation stresses the risks of privileging the affective and emotive experience over the rational dimension. Hooper-Greenhill claims that the numerous 'newly pleasurable technologies of discipline and control' in museums 'have evolved to soften the contradictions and to disguise the inequalities':²⁹ 'the total experience (in living history or interactive exhibits), the total immersion (in gallery workshops and events), can have the function, in the apparently democratised environment of the museum marketplace, of soothing, of silencing, of quieting questions, of closing minds'.³⁰ To Hooper-Greenhill, an excessive emphasis on 'experience' radically limits the opportunities for personal interpretation and restores the museum's authoritarian voice. More radically, Hilde Hein strongly criticises the museum's shift of interest from the authenticity of the objects to the emotional and subjective experience. In the author's view,

the museum's capacity to fabricate experiences (rather than to confirm reality) is celebrated as its *raison d'être*. The measure of the museum is taken by the intensity of the experience it commands and the degree to which that experience 'feels real'.³¹

Such a 'representation of the museum experience', Hein states, 'purports to highlight the visitor's individual creative freedom of interpretation; but actually, it underlines the manipulative interventions of the museum designer'.³² The emphasis on experience replaces old monolithic values with a new one.³³

MOVING IMAGES AND THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

How can screens, projections, sounds, and images become instrumental in ensuring the intensity of the viewer's involvement? When it comes to the museum's exhibition strategies, multi-media devices usually have a number of functions. First, they are valued for their capacity to convey directly, rapidly, and synthetically a large amount of information that would otherwise be quite difficult to provide.³⁴ Films and documentaries can deliver a wealth of information on the historical framework of the exhibit; for instance, historical reconstructions of life scenes from the past have now become commonplace in archaeological museums.³⁵ Moreover, moving images can illustrate complex scientific concepts or aspects that would be difficult to represent statically, such as the functioning of a piece of machinery (as with the Mutoscopes at the Imperial War Museum). Finally, thanks to video testimonies, personal

accounts have found their way into museums, offering a wealth of stories and viewpoints on past events. Besides the function of conveying information, however, audio-visuals may serve a different yet somewhat complementary purpose: when displayed alongside exhibits and artefacts, films and moving images seem to almost ‘animate’ the display by introducing movement and ‘life’ in a space that is traditionally conceived as static and lifeless.³⁶

Over the last decades, screens, projections, and audio-visual displays have become widely accepted museographic tools. Therefore, they are now not only expected, but even almost mandatory in order to make exhibitions more attractive. Their increased popularity has originated a double trend. On the one hand, screens and projections have become fully integrated with the other elements of the display, such as objects, artworks, display cases, and panels displaying texts, photographs, or diagrams. Ross Parry describes the gradual assimilation of digital media in exhibition strategies in terms of ‘naturalisation’: ‘digital ICT [information and communications technology] is less an afterthought, or something adjunct to the exhibition, but is instead conceived as another quality of the gallery . . . it becomes an integral and ambient component of the exhibition’.³⁷

In this scenario, moving images are in no way ‘privileged’ in terms of either content or visibility, but rather constitute one of the many tiles composing the mosaic of an exhibition. However, if screens and projections are now common in museums, designers often employ a series of display strategies that aim to restore what we might call the ‘attractional’ component of audio-visual media. As is well known, Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault developed the notion of ‘attraction’ in film studies, building upon Sergei Eisenstein’s early theories from the 1920s.³⁸ Gunning defines the cinema of attractions as ‘a cinema that displays its visibility’.³⁹ As the scholar explains, ‘the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle’.⁴⁰

The notion of ‘attraction’ was applied not only to a specific phase of early cinema, replaced in about 1906 by the cinema of narrative integration, but also in a wider sense to other periods in cinema history:⁴¹ according to Gunning, the cinema’s ‘exhibitionist’ tendencies⁴² persisted throughout the decades, emerging in specific practices such as those of the avant-gardes, or as components of narrative films – in some genres (such as musicals) more evidently than in others.⁴³

The notion of attraction was also fruitfully applied to other contexts: Viva Paci uses it to analyse how the cinema ‘migrated’ into museums and was thereby revived as a ‘new invention’, leading to a new archaeology of the cinematic *dispositif*.⁴⁴ Along the same line, I believe that the notion of attraction could prove highly useful in investigating the role of moving images in

museum exhibitions. When embedded in displays, films and moving images often produce spectacular mises en scène with a number of immersive effects: by providing a form of pleasure based on shock and ‘strong sensations’, they engage visitors on an emotional and embodied level, stimulating visceral and sensory reactions.

NOTES

1. See Schubert, *The Curator's Egg*.
2. See at least Black, *The Engaging Museum*; Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*.
3. See Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum*.
4. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*.
5. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 211.
6. See Crew and Sims, ‘Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue’.
7. See Cati, *Immagini della memoria*, pp. 111–13.
8. See Charlton, et al. (eds), *History of Oral History*.
9. See UNESCO, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003, available at <http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
10. Available at <<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
11. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, pp. 3–4.
12. Williams, ‘Memorial Museums and the Objectification of Suffering’, p. 223. Paul Williams uses the term ‘memorial museums’ to designate a specific kind of museum devoted to preserving the memory of collective suffering. See Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. We prefer here the notion of ‘memory museum’ proposed by Arnold-de Simine: ‘these museums define themselves not just as sites of academic and institutional history but as spaces of memory, exemplifying the shift from a perceived authoritative master discourse on the past to the paradigm of memory which supposedly allows for a wider range of stories about the past’. *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, pp. 10–12.
13. Kotler and Kotler, *Museum Strategy and Marketing*, p. 136.
14. Ibid.
15. See Biel-Missal and vom Lehn, ‘Aesthetics and Atmosphere in Museums’.
16. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p. 14.
17. Pine and Gilmore, ‘Museums & Authenticity’, p. 80.
18. See Serrell, ‘The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum’.
19. See Englem, ‘History with Special Effects’.
20. Spock, ‘Lincolns in Latex’, p. 95.
21. See the company website at <<https://www.brcweb.com>> (last accessed 30 September 2018).
22. Ibid.

23. Violi, 'Spectacularizing Trauma', p. 53; emphasis in the original.
24. Ibid. p. 55.
25. Ibid.; emphasis in the original.
26. Watson, 'Emotions in the History Museum'.
27. Gregory and Witcomb, 'Beyond Nostalgia'.
28. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.
29. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 214.
30. Ibid. p. 214.
31. Hein, *The Museum in Transition*, p. xi.
32. Ibid. p. 147.
33. Ibid. p. xii.
34. See, for instance, Cristiá, 'El puente entre el visitante y el objeto'.
35. See Stogner, 'The Media-Enhanced Museum Experience'.
36. See Martin, 'Making Movies'.
37. Parry and Sawyer, 'Space and the Machine', p. 46.
38. Gunning, 'Attractions: How They Came into the World'; Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions'; Gaudreault and Gunning, 'Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History'.
39. Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions', p. 382.
40. Ibid. p. 384.
41. See the essays collected in Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*.
42. Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions', p. 382.
43. Ibid. p. 382.
44. Paci, *La Machine à voir*, p. 228.